

# **Humanitarian Crises: What Determines the Level of Emergency Assistance? Media Coverage, Donor Interests and the Aid Business**

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*This paper proposes a basic hypothesis that the volume of emergency assistance any humanitarian crisis attracts is determined by three main factors working either in conjunction or individually. First, it depends on the intensity of media coverage. Second, it depends on the degree of political interest, particularly related to security, that donor governments have in a particular region. Third, the volume of emergency aid depends on strength of humanitarian NGOs and international organisations present in a specific country experiencing a humanitarian emergency. The empirical analysis of a number of emergency situations is carried out based on material that has never been published before. The paper concludes that only occasionally do the media play a decisive role in influencing donors. Rather, the security interests of Western donors are important together with the presence and strength of humanitarian stakeholders, such as NGOs and international organisations lobbying donor governments.*

*Keywords:* CCN effect, donor interests, humanitarian NGOs, Afghanistan, North Korea, Kosovo, Angola, Sudan, Mozambique.

Lucky are the people of Yugoslavia and Somalia as the world's eyes rest on them. Condemned are the people of Juba for the world is denied access to the town and even does not seem to care anyway. It may be a blessing to die in front of a camera — then at least the world will get to know about it. But it is painful to die or be killed without anybody knowing it.

*From a handwritten letter smuggled out of the besieged southern Sudanese town of Juba, August 1992*

## **Introduction**

The above quotation points to a common perception of our age, namely that media attention is extremely important for achieving political attention and, subsequently, for

promoting political action. The link between media attention and political action is often known as the ‘CNN-effect’, a term which implies that the media — particularly television — are able to influence the decisions of political leaders, including the foreign policy agendas of Western governments. In relation to international emergency assistance, therefore, it is commonly assumed that massive media coverage of a humanitarian crisis will lead to increased allocations of emergency funds, whereby humanitarian needs have a better chance of being met.

This paper takes another starting point. It proposes the basic hypothesis that the volume of emergency assistance that any humanitarian crisis attracts is determined by three main factors working either in conjunction or individually. In other words, this paper operates with three types of explanation as to what determines the level of international emergency response to a given crisis. The first explanation maintains that the amount of emergency assistance does indeed depend on the intensity of media coverage. The second explanation assumes that the level of emergency assistance depends on the degree of political and in particular security interests that aid-funding governments (donors) have in the particular region or country where a humanitarian crisis occurs. The third explanation supposes that the volume of emergency assistance depends on the institutional framework and the strength of the network of humanitarian organisations involved in the country or region concerned. More specifically, the latter refers to the presence and strength of multilateral organisations, humanitarian NGOs, and committed individuals in a specific country or area. For reasons of brevity the paper shall henceforth refer to the third type of explanation as ‘stakeholder commitment’.

It is the aim of this paper to substantiate the explanatory value of each of the three competing explanations presented above, and, if possible, the hierarchical relationship that exists between them. This will be done by analysing and comparing a number of humanitarian crises around the world — an analysis that will draw upon quantitative as well as qualitative indicators.

## **A note on the methodological reflections**

The humanitarian crises analysed and compared in this paper were not selected at random. They were chosen for their diversity and their individual ability to substantiate each of the three competing explanations presented above. In other words, while some of the included cases were expected to support the argument that media coverage is the decisive factor in relation to emergency response, other cases were expected to support the argument that donor interest in a given emergency area determines how much aid that area will obtain, and other cases yet were expected to support the argument that ‘stakeholder commitment’ in a given country is the crucial factor.

In the analysis below, four comparisons will be presented. The first comparison examines two humanitarian crises unleashed by natural disasters: the Indian cyclone of October 1999 and the Mozambique floods of late-January 2000. The other three comparisons deal with complex emergencies: Angola, Sudan, the Balkans, DPR of Korea and Afghanistan. For each of the crises mentioned, data on the volume of emergency assistance and data on the level of media coverage have been gathered together and presented as boxes in the text where relevant. All financial data are derived from OCHA’s and ECHO’s respective databases and should be seen as

estimates, not as accurate or total amounts. In other words, the financial figures applied in the analysis should be taken with caution as they are rather uncertain.

For reasons of feasibility, data on the level of media coverage have only been collected for selected periods of time, namely at three-month intervals during central years. In order to increase the validity of the comparisons, we have — with the first comparison as an obvious exception — chosen to compare the media data for the same quarter of each of the examined years. Data have been gathered from the two major TV channels in Denmark (DR-TV and TV2), as well as from 23 leading newspapers in the UK (5), Germany (3), France (3), Italy (2), the US (7), Spain (1) and Denmark (2).

For each of the examined humanitarian crises, data have also been gathered about the scope and severity of the unfolding emergency situation and the need for outside assistance. While it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable information in this regard, in each case it has been attempted to judge the number of people affected and/or the need for food assistance. In connection with the comparison of the natural disasters in India and Mozambique, figures have been compiled from the CRED/OFDA database run by the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED) at the Université Catholique de Louvain in Belgium. In the analysis of the emergencies in the Balkans (Kosovo), Angola, Sudan, DPR of Korea and Afghanistan, figures have been derived from the relevant UN CAP appeals and mid-year CAP updates. Of course, the CAP figures are only indicative of the level of need because it is notoriously difficult to obtain an accurate picture of the number of people affected by a disaster (Randel and German, 2000: 12ff).

For Kosovo, the number of people who were displaced within FRY, or who had fled across national borders during the height of the crisis, were used. For Angola, Sudan, DPR of Korea and Afghanistan, we have used the number of people who were deemed to be in need of food aid by the WFP/FAO. This figure, of course, only reflects one dimension of an emergency intervention, but we found this to be the only consistently available and relevant figure to use as an indicator of needs in these complex emergencies. Because of the inherent insecurities associated with using food aid figures, however, the reader should consider them as indicators only of the magnitude of a given crisis.

Finally, it should be stressed that when it comes to assessing the level of donor interest and the level of ‘stakeholder commitment’ in a given crisis area, it has not been feasible to apply any quantifiable indicators. Such assessments, therefore, will build on qualitative judgement.

## **Explaining the level of emergency assistance**

The first explanation proposed above is the intensity of media coverage. In the academic literature there is no substantial evidence which shows the existence of a general CNN effect within the realm of foreign policy (Robinson, 2002; Shaw, 1996). On the contrary, studies of media influence on international events indicate that the media have had an effect only in situations where the governments involved were lacking a clear policy. The few ‘proofs’ of the alleged massive influence of the media are very often the Western intervention in Iraqi Kurdistan in the spring of 1991, and the humanitarian intervention in Somalia in December 1992. However, these cases seem to be exceptions to the rule since media coverage of human suffering only rarely leads to Western policy initiatives (Gowing, 1994; Robinson, 1999, 2002). Rather, there is a

general tendency for politicians and governments to turn the media into their ‘servants’ by communicating the message of the government to the public (Robinson, 1999).

Looking specifically at humanitarian crises, it has to be acknowledged that the situation may be different from the one prevailing in foreign politics in general. Thus, Lionel Rosenblatt argues that ‘in a narrowly focussed situation such as humanitarian emergencies, the media play a decisive role in informing the public and stimulating action’ (1996: 140 and 139). There seems to be general support to the claim that media coverage is important for promoting political action in humanitarian crises (Rothberg and Weiss, 1996; Robinson, 2002; Minear et al., 1996). On the hand, existing research on media influence in humanitarian disaster situations actually fails ‘to clarify the significance of media impact on humanitarian intervention decisions’ (Robinson, 1999). Nevertheless, recent empirical research into the CNN effect in humanitarian emergency situations suggests that there is ‘a strong CNN effect in instances of aid relief and deployment of troops as part of a non-coercive operation’ (Robinson, 2002: 126). Thus, in relation to the first of the three possible explanations applied here, it can be specified that the paper has a dual purpose. First, it aims to contribute to the clarification of the significance of media impact in humanitarian emergency situations. Second, it proposes to look into the above-mentioned argument that there seems to be a particularly strong CNN effect in humanitarian emergency situations.

Analyses suggest that a number of preconditions have to be fulfilled if the Western mass media are to focus massively on a crisis (Natsios, 1996). First of all, the crisis has to be news and the emergency situation has to provide the basis for producing dramatic and emotive imagery (TV footage and still photos). Moreover, a humanitarian crisis — in Africa for instance — has to compete with emergencies in other parts of the world. Another precondition for media coverage, therefore, has to do with what is sometimes called the ‘news-attention cycle’ or the ‘issue-attention cycle’. These terms imply that some issues, particularly distant ones not directly affecting people in donor countries, invariably receive attention only on a cyclical basis. Sometimes, this phenomenon is expressed in more popular phrases such as ‘the world does not have an appetite for more than one crisis at a time’ (Livingston, 1996: 83–4). In reality, this precondition contains two elements. On the one hand is the argument that the world cannot cope with more than one emergency within a certain time frame. On the other hand, the statement is complicated by the argument of geographical proximity.

There can be no doubt that the most fundamental precondition for media attention is that a humanitarian crisis has to be ‘news’, and that it has to be able to deliver emotive reporting. Here, developing countries and Africa south of the Sahara in particular, face problems, as most editors do not perceive it as ‘news’ when Africans are killing Africans. Also, for most Western mainstream media, it is not really ‘news’ if Africa experiences yet another humanitarian disaster. At least, this seems to be the most important media-related explanation to the limited news reporting on the civil wars in Sudan and Angola — wars that have dragged on for decades, but whose daily outcomes are numerous casualties and wrecked lives. Hence, if an emergency situation contains no news, the message has to be ‘framed’ in the right way in order to create a public opinion for action (Robinson, 1999; Giradet, 1996: 58). The need for framing is related to the fact that ‘media reports do not objectively report on humanitarian crises. Rather, they report crises in particular and often very different ways’ (Robinson, 1999: 6), in some cases tending to ‘advocate’ for action, in other instances not.

As mentioned above, a second possible explanation for the level of emergency assistance a given humanitarian crisis will attract refers to the interests — especially

the security interests — of donor governments. As there is only limited research into the issue of donor interests in connection with humanitarian crises, this paper assumes that donors may basically be motivated by the same kind of interests as they are when they grant long-term development assistance (ODA). The ‘aid motivations debate’ operates with two explanatory models, one called ‘recipient needs’, the other called ‘donor interests’ (McKinlay and Little, 1977, 1978, 1979). Donor interests consist of elements such as (national) security interests, economic interests (for example, trade and investment interests) and wider political interests. ‘Recipient needs’ are related to the economic and social level of development of poor countries. According to the ‘aid-motivation literature’, the allocation of development aid from big donors, such as the US, France, UK and European Union, tends to be motivated by donor interests, whereas small- and middle-sized donors, like the Scandinavian countries, are mainly motivated by the needs of the recipients when they give aid. A basic assumption of the donor interest explanation is that the amount of aid received by any low-income country is proportional to the level of interest of the donor. These reflections are the basis for the argument of the paper that donor interests not least security concerns play an important role in motivating decisions on granting aid to specific humanitarian crises.

During the 1990s, however, a new security agenda emerged which had significant impact both on the amount of official humanitarian aid and the purpose of giving humanitarian assistance. The amount of official humanitarian assistance more than doubled between 1990 and 2000 (Macrae, 2002: 11). Increasingly, it became the order of the day that humanitarian assistance was one instrument among a number of political responses to conflicts. It became clear that emergency aid served political purposes in particular in legitimising international military and political intervention, ‘proving the humanitarian credentials of Western governments to their own domestic audience and those in conflict-affected countries’ (ibid.: 8). There is no doubt that Macrae is right in pointing out that humanitarian aid during the 1990s increasingly came to legitimise military intervention. However, it is questionable if the purpose to legitimise military action can be considered as a separate motivation for giving humanitarian aid. This paper assumes that the purpose of legitimising military intervention is compatible with the reference in the aid-motivation debate to donor interests and specifically to security interests.

The paper also proposes a third type of explanation that stresses the significance of ‘stakeholder commitment’ in particular countries or regions. The mere existence of the specialised humanitarian agencies, donor administrations (for example, ECHO, USAID, Danida), early warning systems and rapid reaction units, industry standards (Sphere, Codes of Conduct), specialised information structures (IRIN, ReliefWeb), coordinating entities and professional networks (OCHA, SCHR, VOICE) ensure some kind of basic response to most major or medium-sized disasters. This institutionalisation of a value-based sense of duty to help others in need is sometimes referred to as the ‘aid business’. The ‘stakeholder commitment’ argument can be exemplified by the situation in the Sudan. Here, UN agencies, international and national NGOs, the de-facto ruling powers in the country, and, to some extent, even back donor representatives (governmental and international/governmental donors), are brought together in coordinated annual needs assessments, aid-programme planning, and coordinated fundraising efforts — namely the UN-led Operation Lifeline Sudan (OLS) and the UN Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP). Other ongoing crises, such as the ones in DPR of Korea, Western Sahara, Congo-Kinshasa, Congo-Brazzaville and

**Box 1 Comparison of India cyclone and Mozambique flood media coverage, 1999 and 2000**

*Media coverage: number of TV news spots on Danish national television (DR-TV & TV2):*

India cyclone (15 Oct 1999–15 Jan 2000): 16  
Mozambique floods (1 Feb 2000–1 May 2000): 87

*Media coverage: number of articles in 23 newspapers (US & Western Europe):*

India cyclone (15 Oct 1999–15 Jan 2000): 91  
Mozambique floods (1 Feb 2000–1 May 2000): 382

*Total value of received humanitarian assistance in US\$:*

India cyclone: 23,097,000  
Mozambique floods: 165,846,000

*Sources:* DR-TV, TV2, LexisNexis, Polinfo and OCHA.

Tajikistan, do have UN agency and international NGO presence, but in these cases the numbers of actors are smaller, their interactions less coordinated and they form a much weaker ‘humanitarian lobby’ than the ‘aid business lobbies’ in Sudan and Angola.

**Mozambique and India compared: the significance of media framing**

It is obvious from the TV figures on the media coverage of the India cyclone (1999) and the Mozambique floods (2000) that the coverage of the latter crisis was more than five times as extensive as the coverage of the former (87 spots versus 16 spots)(see Box 1). A similar pattern is found in the media coverage of the same emergencies in 23 influential newspapers in Western Europe and the US. In the period covered, the Indian cyclone was treated in 91 articles, whereas the Mozambique flood was described in 382 articles. Put differently, Mozambique received at least four times as much media attention as India in the three-month periods covered by the survey. First, we can only establish that there is a correlation between media coverage and the amount of aid in the case of Mozambique. On the other hand, the correlation seems strongly to indicate that the intensity of media coverage is sufficient to explain why Mozambique received more than seven times the amount of emergency aid that India received. Nevertheless, it is still relevant to reflect on the circumstances under which the two emergencies received media coverage.

In October 1999, the coastal parts of the Indian state of Orissa were hit by a super cyclone heralded by a seven-metre-high tidal wave followed by storm surges and floods. The official number of people killed was just under 10,000 and some 12.6 million people were reported to be affected (OFDA/CRED EM-DAT). Senior aid officials, interviewed a few months later, all agreed that the real casualty figure was probably 50 to 100 per cent higher because of a substantial number of illegal and unregistered migrant workers living in the coastal belt (authors’ own research in February 2000). Some three months later two cyclones and continuous heavy rainfall led to widespread floods in Mozambique. About 800 people died and approximately

1.5 million people were affected (OFDA/CRED EM-DAT). Thus, looking at these figures as indicators of the magnitude of these specific disasters and the humanitarian needs they prompted, it is clear that the super cyclone that hit Orissa was — with all due respect to the affected Mozambicans — by far the largest and worse disaster.

The basic question is: Why then did the African emergency attract so much more attention, and ultimately funding, from the outside world? It is difficult to say anything definite about the question of accessibility for the media, but the issue may have contributed significantly to explain the difference in the international responses to the two disasters. After a few days, access to the disaster zone and the transport situation was not a major problem in Mozambique. On the contrary, reporters were assisted by authorities, aid agencies and the South African Air Force in getting quick and almost unhindered access to the disaster zone and, thus, some very dramatic and compelling footage. Initial access was much more complicated in India, as the authorities declared a state of emergency and a no-go zone for most of the affected areas. This included the media, which for the first 4–5 days were restricted to report from the relative calm of the Orissa state capitol of Bhubaneswar. By the time the media was finally allowed full access to the worst-affected coastal areas, international interest had long vanished and dramatic footage, on the scale of what was to appear from Mozambique, was no longer at hand. Second, the two cases would appear to be similar as far as personal risk for the reporters is concerned, implying that this particular element was negligible in both cases. Third, it is striking that the two flood situations clearly negate the assumption that the world has enough of one emergency per year, or that the news-attention circle explains the focus on one emergency but not on the other. For the assumption to hold in this case, Mozambique would not have received the massive aid it actually did. On the contrary, India, being first in time, should have been the crisis receiving most attention — and thus aid.

It appears that the best explanation as to why Mozambique was such a big news story was the framing of the media coverage. Put simply, the world had never before on TV seen a woman give birth to a child in a treetop while the viewers simultaneously could hear the dramatic sound of rotor blades on the South African helicopter hovering over the woman. And never before had TV shown such a spectacular rescue operation involving a considerable number of people being rescued from treetops by helicopters. Thus, framing was no doubt important in the Mozambican case. In summary, a comparison of the two emergencies caused by flood confirms the generally held belief that media coverage matters and also that it matters in particular if the framing is innovative, as was the case for Mozambique where the framing almost demanded action.

We then turn to the second type of explanation concerning the significance of donor interests in the two cases. It is impossible to identify major international security concerns in relation to any of these two disasters implying that this variable does not add a convincing explanation to the difference in donor responses to the two emergencies. Of course the absence of security concerns of the donors in the two specific emergency cases does not mean that India and Mozambique are of no significance to the donors' security concerns in general. On the contrary, the size, the geographical location, plus the fact that India has nuclear weapons make India much more important in security terms than Mozambique.

As far as the third explanatory variable, namely the level of 'stakeholder involvement', is concerned there are important differences between Mozambique and India. UN agencies and numerous NGOs were involved in both cases and by the time the disasters hit, both countries had strong links to the national and international aid

community and to major donor countries. But in India the state and central governments have strong traditions and experience with intervening and taking the lead in national disaster response relying only on international agencies and donors to supplement and fund their own efforts. This is not true in Mozambique, which was almost totally dependent on the quick intervention and initiatives by outside agencies, donors and entities such as the South African Air Force.

Even when this factor is taken into account, the remarkable differences in the media coverage and the outside assistance is glaring and no doubt, the intensity of media coverage is the main explanation to the big difference in donor response to the two emergencies. At least, it is not possible to explain the difference in donor response by referring to either donor interests or solely the differences in stakeholder interests and commitment. This is even more the case when one takes the very different scale of the two disasters into account.

### **Africa versus the Balkans: a small victory for humanitarian networking?**

Based on the media coverage in the two Danish national TV-channels, DR-TV and TV2, a comparison of a nearby case, Kosovo, with two more distant cases, Sudan and Angola, reveals an interesting but not surprising pattern (see Box 2).

Clearly, the complex emergency in Kosovo received much more Danish TV coverage than the crises in Angola and Sudan during the three periods surveyed. The same pattern is found in the coverage of Angola, Sudan and Kosovo in the international newspapers, especially during the first quarter of 1999: almost 5,000 articles covered Kosovo while fewer than 450 articles covered Angola and Sudan put together. It is

#### **Box 2 Comparison of media coverage of Kosovo to Sudan and Angola**

*Media coverage: number of TV news spots in Danish television (DR-TV & TV2), first quarter of each year:*

|                |               |                  |
|----------------|---------------|------------------|
| Angola 1998: 0 | Sudan 1998: 3 | Kosovo 1998: 72  |
| Angola 1999: 4 | Sudan 1999: 0 | Kosovo 1999: 483 |
| Angola 2000: 0 | Sudan 2000: 0 | Kosovo 2000: 140 |

*Media coverage: number of articles in 23 newspapers (US & Western Europe), first quarter of each year:*

|                  |                 |                    |
|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| Angola 1998: 69  | Sudan 1998: 121 | Kosovo 1998: 948   |
| Angola 1999: 277 | Sudan 1999: 164 | Kosovo 1999: 4,983 |
| Angola 2000: 151 | Sudan 2000: 173 | Kosovo 2000: 1,769 |

*Total value of humanitarian assistance in million US\$ (CAP + outside appeal):*

|                  |                 |                         |
|------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Angola 1997: 178 | Sudan: 1997: 90 | The Balkans 1997: 349   |
| Angola 1998: 100 | Sudan 1998: 441 | The Balkans 1998: 426   |
| Angola 1999: 150 | Sudan 1999: 213 | The Balkans 1999: 1,168 |
| Angola 2000: 101 | Sudan 2000: 125 | The Balkans 2000: 318   |
| Angola 2001: 149 | Sudan 2001: 232 | The Balkans 2001: 375   |

*Sources:* DR-TV, TV2, LexisNexis, Polinfo and OCHA.

also evident from Box 2 that the figures for media attention and the figures for the amount of emergency assistance show a clear correlation: Kosovo was covered by five times as many articles in 1999 as in 1998, and the Balkans — exactly because of the Kosovo crisis — saw a tripling of aid allocations from 1998 to 1999. Apparently, this correlation serves as a confirmation of the assumption that media coverage is a decisive factor in relation to the allocation of emergency assistance. But is this really the case?

Let us take a closer look at the scope and nature of the three complex emergencies in question. It has to be pointed out that the amount of money available for the emergency operations in Kosovo (the Balkans) was very large indeed when the needs in Kosovo are compared to the needs in Angola and Sudan during the same period. Absolute figures for the number of people in need are difficult to obtain, but based on information from the annual FAO/WFP crop assessments and the UN CAP appeals material, the following figures can be used as indicators of the magnitude of acute needs in the three emergencies (it must be emphasised, however, that these figures only represent food aid needs while the funding figures cover needs in all sectors of a humanitarian response):

- *Kosovo:* During the spring of 1999, some 1.5 million people were directly affected by the eruption of war in Kosovo. Some 900,000 fled — or were forced to flee — Kosovo to Serbia, Macedonia or Albania. Another 600,000 were displaced within Kosovo. As of July 1999, most of these people started returning to Kosovo, but they returned to towns and villages, which often were partly or totally destroyed. From July and onwards the number of people in absolute need of food aid dropped quickly but large-scale reconstruction tasks remained.
- *Sudan:* Taking into account the large seasonal and annual variations, an average of at least 2.4 million people were in absolute need of food aid during the period 1998–2001. In 1998, a severe famine situation developed in Bahr-al-Ghazal, resulting in short-lived, moderate media interest in Sudan. The average figure of 2.4 million people in need is a very conservative one, as UN operations in Sudan are guided by political agreements with the warring parties, which often leave substantial numbers of needy groups outside the reach of humanitarian intervention. In contrast to the figure of needy people in Kosovo, the figure of people in need in Sudan does not include needs in the other areas, for example health and rehabilitation.
- *Angola:* Again this paper will use a fairly conservative estimate of between 1.0 and 1.8 million people in need of food aid in Angola in the period 1998–2001. As with Sudan, significant groups of needy people were outside reach (and assessment) by humanitarian agencies and therefore not included in this figure. Also again, needs in other areas (health and rehabilitation) are not included in this estimate.

These figures show a remarkable disproportion in availability of emergency assistance in relation to the acute needs. Even when one uses conservative needs assessments, a disparity factor of more than five is noticed. Or put differently, a short dramatic war and refugee crisis in south-eastern Europe attracts more than five times as much aid per needy person as did the protracted wars and humanitarian crises in Angola and Sudan. Having concluded this, it should not be ignored that, in spite of the extremely limited media coverage of the two African emergencies, these humanitarian

crises continued to receive a not insignificant amount of emergency assistance during the years 1997–2001 (in the range of \$90 to \$440 million per year). As far as assistance to Angola is concerned, the amount of money channelled to the country remained fairly constant from 1997 to 2001. The figures show that media attention was negligible for the three periods examined, nevertheless Angola constantly received emergency assistance from abroad. This observation questions the assumption that media attention is the only factor to decide whether or not a humanitarian crisis is ‘forgotten’ in financial terms. The figures on media coverage and emergency assistance for the Sudan point in the same direction, namely that media coverage by itself cannot explain the amount of aid for a particular situation.

Moreover, the widespread conviction held by members of the aid community that the Kosovo crisis ‘stole’ or diverted emergency assistance from Africa to Europe (the Balkans) is difficult to substantiate, at least if the focus is exclusively on Angola and Sudan. If at all, it is only possible to draw such a conclusion for Angola for the year 2000 (and only if one disregards the fact that WFP had \$66 million to carry over from 1999). As far as Sudan in 2000 is concerned, it may be possible to explain the ‘low’ level of emergency assistance by the Balkan effect. Conversely, it may be much more important that it rose to its ‘usual’ level in 2001. At least, the return to the normal level of emergency assistance to Angola and Sudan in 2001 questions the significance of media coverage of humanitarian crises in general.

Applying the second type of explanation (according to which levels of emergency assistance are determined by donor interests in a given crisis area) certainly makes a lot of sense in relation to the three cases in question. Because of the proximity to the EU, Kosovo was a security concern but one that was very much mixed up with undefined political interests. The security interests were related strongly to the fear that violence and civil war would spill over into the other former Yugoslavian republics and other Balkan countries (Mccgwire, 2002; Williams, 2001: 31ff). Also, the reluctance to accept large numbers of refugees on a permanent basis that could destabilise neighbouring countries definitely played an important role for the decision-makers in NATO (Roberts, 1999: 107ff). This type of security interest became even more important because it coincided with the 50th anniversary of NATO when there was a strong political need in both the US and Europe to find a *raison d’être* for the alliance in the absence of the Soviet threat (Johnstone, 2000: 7ff; Rieff, 2000). These two types of interest in combination turned the Kosovo crisis into high politics. The costly war against Serbian troops in Kosovo is a very strong indication of the immense significance that follows the combination of security concerns and crucial political interests. Nevertheless, the mass media presented NATO’s air campaign in early 1999 as a humanitarian intervention (Rieff, 2000: 26ff; Herman and Peterson, 2000: 113ff; Williams, 2001).

In comparison, the humanitarian crises in Sudan and Angola took place far away from both Europe and North America, and they did in no way represent a security threat to these regions. In summary, the media explanation and the donor interest explanation both point in the same direction, namely that Kosovo would receive much more assistance than the two African cases — which was true. Based on this observation, there may be reason to reflect on whether the tremendous emergency assistance to Kosovo was not just relieving the sufferings of hundreds of thousand of people. There may be a basis for arguing that the very considerable volume of humanitarian aid basically also served as one among a number of instruments of crisis management. In that respect, the humanitarian assistance to Kosovo further cemented the trend that was observed during the 1990s that humanitarian aid in selected cases

served as an instrument of crisis management (Duffield et al., 2001; Macrae and Leader, 2000).

Now, if we turn to the third type of explanation (according to which ‘stakeholder commitment’ is crucial to the allocation of aid), we may be able to explain the fact that — in spite of the absence of media attention and limited donor interests in the region — Sudan and Angola received considerable amounts of emergency assistance between 1997 and 2001, albeit far from enough to cover actual needs. A possible explanation for this may be that a large number of UN agencies and major international NGOs have been engaged in humanitarian operations in both Angola and the Sudan for more than a decade. The humanitarian agencies have well-developed fundraising tools, they are organised in international lobby networks and they have direct access to back donor bureaucracies. The same agencies work continuously with representatives of the media in order to ensure a low but constant level of publicity. And major back donors, such as ECHO, have permanent representation in both these countries and are engaged in long-term planning with partner agencies. Finally it should not be underestimated that many aid workers and journalists have visited these countries (or lived and worked there) and therefore might have a particular affinity and sensitivity to appeals for assistance from those particular areas.

In summary, the comparison between the complex emergencies in Kosovo and those in Sudan and Angola revealed a number of interesting features. The least surprising observation may be that the combination of massive media attention and strong donor interests resulted in massive economic assistance to Kosovo. It is more interesting that in spite of the absence of media attention and significant donor interests, Angola and Sudan managed to attract significant levels of emergency assistance from 1997 to the present — even if this assistance did not meet the actual needs. This somewhat surprising observation can best be explained by the existence of a long-lived and influential humanitarian presence and lobby networks directly engaged in these particular emergencies.

### **North Korea compared to Angola and the Sudan: security is a strong argument**

A quick glance at Box 3 reveals that North Korea received considerable annual amounts of emergency assistance between 1997 and 2001, although there were indeed fluctuations. The amount of emergency assistance to North Korea was, for all years covered except 1998, above the levels channelled to Angola and Sudan. There was generally a low degree of attention from the 23 consulted newspapers towards all three cases during the periods covered in the survey, with North Korea receiving slightly more attention. Basically, there was no coverage on the two major Danish television stations of any of the three complex emergencies in question.

The actual scale of the humanitarian crisis in North Korea is extremely difficult to quantify (Goodkind and West, 2001; Bennett, 1999: 15–20). Humanitarian operations started in earnest in North Korea in 1995–6. The official explanation was, and continued to be in the years to follow, severe floods and other ‘freak weather’ phenomena. Behind this explanation lie the realities of an economy, ecology and agriculture in near-total collapse following the abrupt disappearance of the Soviet Union and China’s conversion to its own version of capitalism. These macro events

**Box 3 Comparison of Angola, Sudan and Korea media coverage, 1997–2001**

*Media coverage: number of TV news spots in Danish television (DR-TV & TV2), first quarter of each year:*

|                |               |                      |
|----------------|---------------|----------------------|
| Angola 1998: 0 | Sudan 1998: 3 | DPR of Korea 1998: 3 |
| Angola 1999: 4 | Sudan 1999: 0 | DPR of Korea 1999: 2 |
| Angola 2000: 0 | Sudan 2000: 0 | DPR of Korea 2000: 1 |

*Media coverage: number of articles in 23 newspapers (US & Western Europe), first quarter of each year:*

|                  |                 |                        |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Angola 1998: 69  | Sudan 1998: 121 | DPR of Korea 1998: 184 |
| Angola 1999: 277 | Sudan 1999: 164 | DPR of Korea 1999: 320 |
| Angola 2000: 151 | Sudan 2000: 173 | DPR of Korea 2000: 254 |

*Total value of humanitarian assistance in million US\$ (CAP + outside appeal):*

|                  |                 |                        |
|------------------|-----------------|------------------------|
| Angola 1997: 178 | Sudan 1997: 90  | DPR of Korea 1997: 293 |
| Angola 1998: 100 | Sudan 1998: 441 | DPR of Korea 1998: 335 |
| Angola 1999: 150 | Sudan 1999: 213 | DPR of Korea 1999: 236 |
| Angola 2000: 101 | Sudan 2000: 125 | DPR of Korea 2000: 224 |
| Angola 2001: 149 | Sudan 2001: 232 | DPR of Korea 2001: 375 |

*Sources:* DR-TV, TV2, LexisNexis, Polinfo and OCHA.

left North Korea near bankruptcy and revealed a state that had been heavily dependent on subsidised trading agreements with the former communist bloc.

As the real nature of the humanitarian crisis in North Korea was never named, the Korean authorities never allowed UN agencies and international NGOs to undertake proper and thorough needs assessments throughout the entire country (Bennett, 1999: 7ff). Still, using the best available data from FAO/WFP food and crop assessments, it can be estimated that 4–7 million North Koreans needed food assistance during the years 1998–2001. There are significant uncertainties and annual and seasonal variations in this figure and it should be taken only as an indicator. Other human needs, such as those in the areas of health, housing and rehabilitation, are not included in the above estimate.

Turning to the first type of explanation (the ‘media-coverage explanation’), the figures show that in all three cases (Angola, Sudan and North Korea) media attention was extremely limited in the periods covered. In spite of this, all three countries received considerable amounts of humanitarian assistance. But neither the level of aid nor the fluctuations from one year to the other can be explained by the intensity of media attention towards these three cases. Why was attention from the media so limited in the case of North Korea? Is a large-scale famine in the world’s last truly communist state not ‘news’? Probably, the single word ‘access’ can explain this. By and large, the media have had extremely limited access to cover events in North Korea (Aaltola, 1999: 381–4). The little coverage that was reported about the grave humanitarian crisis in the country was largely based on media interviews with travelling aid workers from UN agencies and international NGOs.

Having documented the low degree of media coverage, we are left with a question: Why did North Korea receive relatively so much humanitarian assistance?

Probably, this can best be explained by the strong security interests that lie with the single-largest donor of emergency assistance and food aid to North Korea, namely the US (Harnisch, 2002: 856ff). But also China, Japan and South Korea have much at stake in North Korea. One main security consideration for these states is that massive hunger in North Korea could create internal disorder (Gurtov, 2002: 399ff, 404ff; Aaltola, 1999: 381f). Subsequently, such disorder could inspire the North Korean armed forces to react in 'inappropriate' ways which might threaten regional stability, especially as it is assumed that North Korea possesses nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (Harnisch, 2002: 861ff; Aaltola, 1999: 384, 376; Bennett, 1999: 1ff). Another nightmare scenario for South Korea and China alike is a North Korea that simply implodes, sending up to 20 million starving refugees towards their borders. Balanced against such alarming scenarios, it is possible to argue that a modest international aid operation is judged to be the better option.

The claim that a strong donor interest in security and stability on the Korean peninsula is the explanation for the considerable amounts of emergency assistance received by North Korea is buttressed by the absence of any stakeholder interests worth mentioning in this particular area. The presence of UN agencies and international NGOs in North Korea is rather limited, owing to the fact that the conditions put down by the North Korean authorities tend to put off aid workers and back donors alike (Bennett, 1999: 5–6). There is only restricted access to needy groups, very limited freedom of movement for staff, no proper baseline information about needs and very little scope for monitoring the end use of the assistance given (Bennett, 1999). Taken together, these working conditions do not at all resemble the opportunities for lobbying and networking that humanitarian groups enjoy in countries like Angola and Sudan.

In summary, the comparison between Angola, Sudan and North Korea is interesting because all three countries have received considerable amounts of emergency assistance in spite of an absence of consistent media attention. Once again, this comparison questions the significance of media coverage as being the main determining factor in connection with emergency assistance allocation. In the case of North Korea, rather, the main explanation was the security concerns of the most important donor country which is the US (Scobell, 2002: 351, 366ff). Nor should it be forgotten that the US also deliberately used both its fuel supplies under the 1994 agreement and its humanitarian assistance as a means to obtain political concessions from the North Korean political leadership (Aaltola, 1999). Apparently, the use of humanitarian aid to achieve political ends in North Korea has been further stepped up during the current Bush administration. In the cases of Angola and Sudan, as we have seen, the continuous flow of emergency assistance can best be explained by the labour and lobbying efforts of committed stakeholders, such as UN agencies, NGOs and back donor representatives. Finally, the comparison shows that it is impossible to isolate any single determining factor that decides how much emergency assistance a given crisis will attract.

## **Afghanistan before and after 11 September: security as the ultimate argument**

Despite remaining uncertainties about the most recent aid figure (2002), it should be obvious that the financial assistance to the emergency operations in Afghanistan increased markedly between 2000 and 2002 (see Box 4). Or more precisely, the

**Box 4 Media coverage of Afghanistan, 2000–2002**

*Media coverage: number of TV news spots in Danish television (DR-TV & TV2), first quarter of each year:*

Afghanistan 2000: 17      2001: 25      2002: 365

*Media coverage: number of articles in 23 newspapers (US & Western Europe), first quarter of each year:*

Afghanistan 2000: 428      2001: 837      2002: 6,684

*Total value of humanitarian assistance in million US\$ (CAP + outside appeal):*

Afghanistan 2000: 230      2001: 665      2002: 880

*Sources:* DR-TV, TV2, LexisNexis, Polinfo and OCHA.

dramatic increase took place in the last three months of 2001, during which Afghanistan received \$433 million as compared to \$232 million for the first three quarters of the year. In other words, Afghanistan is an interesting case because of the tremendous growth in emergency aid allocations in the wake of September 11.

The terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon soon established a link to Afghanistan, and almost overnight the protracted crisis in Afghanistan became a central security concern to the US administration and to most governments in Western Europe. There is no doubt that security is the decisive factor in explaining the growth in emergency assistance, a fact confirmed by the media figures showing moderate attention to the situation in Afghanistan in the first quarters of 2000 and 2001, thus before September 11.

The figures for the media coverage of Afghanistan are striking. In the first quarter of 2000, 17 television news spots appeared on the two Danish television channels. The first quarter of 2001 produced 25 such news spots. The figure for the first quarter of 2002 is 365. The corresponding figures for the international newspapers included in this survey are even more staggering: 428 articles for the first quarter of 2000, 837 for the first quarter of 2001 and finally 6.684 articles for the first quarter of 2002. These figures underline an observation made by Piers Robinson, who argues that the most common pattern of media coverage shows that it is actually the politicians and particularly the White House who decide the agenda for international media attention (1999). The case of Afghanistan seems to prove this point. First came the US government's establishment of the link between the terrorist attacks and Afghanistan. Then came the attention of the media, and finally came emergency assistance. Seen in this perspective, there may even be basis for arguing that emergency assistance to Afghanistan has been an instrument for crisis management. If this statement is seen in connection with the conclusion that emergency assistance also served as a crisis management instrument during the Kosovo crisis, it is possible to claim that maybe we are witnessing a new security agenda characterised by the increased use of humanitarian aid for the purpose of crisis management (Macrae, 2002: 5ff).

It is worth noting that Afghanistan did receive emergency assistance during the 1990s — in spite of moderate media attention and in spite of limited donor interests in the country. The modest and far from sufficient amounts of aid received during the 1990s have to be explained by the fact that UN agencies, the ICRC and a limited number of international NGOs had a stake in keeping the influx of emergency

assistance as high as possible. In contrast, the moderate but still insufficient level of funding in relation to the massive needs has to be explained by the lack of media attention combined with the absence of any real donor interests in Afghanistan before 11 September 2001. The war and the human suffering in Afghanistan had been going on for 22 years prior to the events that led to Western military intervention.

By 2001, Afghanistan was in the grip of severe drought and, according to WFP/FAO assessments the number of people in need of food aid had reached some six million. The UN agencies warned of a food deficit of one million tonnes despite frequent appeals for increased aid. Yet, the aid allocations in early and mid-2001 were still rather moderate and media attention low. A year later, in August 2002, FAO/WFP again presented a figure of six million people in need of food aid. In other words, two months prior to the enormous and sudden rise in the emergency assistance to Afghanistan, the need for food aid was the same as it had been for some time. The question remains, therefore, if the recent US-led military campaign against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces created much greater needs for emergency relief in Afghanistan, thereby prompting a radical increase in the aid volume? In a country already torn by war and agony? Hardly.

Rather, the explanation seems to lie with the synergy effect of the sudden escalation in security concerns in the region and the subsequent media coverage. First, it manifested itself in the conspicuous correlation between the growth in the volume of emergency assistance and the US military intervention in Afghanistan. Second, it showed itself in the level of aid and the intensity in media coverage, which is clearly demonstrated by the figures above.

In summary, there is little doubt that new security concerns — and especially those of the US — were able to explain the tremendous increase in the volume of emergency assistance to Afghanistan since October last year. This claim is supported by the fact that there was no massive increase in the media coverage of Afghanistan prior to the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, although it was well known that the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan had already escalated dramatically long before then.

## Conclusion

It was the aim of the paper to give some answers to the tricky question: What determines the level of emergency assistance? We have sought to explain why some humanitarian crises receive much more emergency assistance from the international donor community than others do. The paper has worked on the basis of a fundamental hypothesis, namely that emergency aid allocations are determined by three crucial factors: the intensity of media attention; the degree of donor interest in the crisis area; and the level of what this paper has called ‘stakeholder commitment’.

The oft-repeated argument that media coverage is crucial in relation to emergency aid allocation was confirmed in a number of cases analysed here. It was most unconditionally confirmed by the first comparison between the India cyclone (1999) and the Mozambique floods (2000). However, none of the other cases analysed in this paper lead to the same unambiguous confirmation that media attention is the most significant explanation as to the amounts of emergency aid going to specific crises. While the comparison between Angola, Sudan and Kosovo did point towards the importance of media coverage in securing assistance from the outside world, the

same comparison could be used to question the independent significance of media attention. In other words, the conspicuous differences in aid allocation to Angola, Sudan and Kosovo in 1999 were undoubtedly also a result of the immense political and security interests vested in the European realm. Certainly, it seems plausible to claim that the massive international emergency assistance to Kosovo became one of a number of crisis management tools used by the Western powers in their warfare against the Serbs. Moreover, it is also possible to argue that it was the Western politicians that set the agenda and priorities which, only afterwards, were communicated by the mass media to the populations around the world. The media, one could say, became an instrument of the decision-makers.

The same conclusion applies to the situation in Afghanistan after 11 September 2001. Here, security concerns were certainly also in the forefront, and rather than setting the agenda, the media were turned into 'servants' by Western decision-makers. Like in Kosovo, one can say that the sudden massive level of international emergency assistance to Afghanistan became an instrument for crisis management. Our examination of emergency aid to North Korea also points to the immense significance of donor interests or, more specifically, security concerns. At least it seems difficult to explain the relatively high level of emergency assistance to a Communist one-party state with extremely limited media access and very meagre possibilities for aid evaluation unless it is accepted that security concern was the driving force. Again, the North Korean case, just like Afghanistan and Kosovo, made the point that Western governments, as the main aid donors, use emergency assistance as an instrument for crisis management.

Thus, the paper has laid the foundation for concluding that only occasionally do the media play a decisive role in influencing donors to allocate large amounts of aid to specific emergencies. This is basically in agreement with the analysis carried out by Larry Minear, Colin Scott and Thomas Weiss in first half of the 1990s (Minear et al., 1996). Even humanitarian crises that are largely ignored by the media may very well uphold a substantial — albeit insufficient — level of emergency assistance, either because there are significant donor interests in the area or because the 'stakeholder commitment' is long-lived and strong. The latter was the case for Sudan and Angola where humanitarian networking and continuous lobbying by well-coordinated UN agencies and international NGOs are prevalent conditions.

Our analysis has not established a firm basis for claiming that one of the three explanations advanced in the beginning is more valid than are the other two. Yet, it seems fair to conclude that, in relation to the allocation of emergency aid, media attention is no more crucial than donor interests are, and certainly not as important as the so-called 'CNN effect' would have it. Rather, the case seems to be that the media play a crucial role in influencing decision-makers only when there are no vital security issues at stake, namely when a humanitarian crisis occurs in a place of little strategic importance to aid-funding governments.

Interestingly, this conclusion seems to be in agreement with the most recent research into the CNN effect where Robinson shows that it was 'strong' in some clear-cut humanitarian crises like the one in Ethiopia in 1984 and in emergency situations that involved deployment of troops in non-coercive operations (Robinson, 2002: 121ff). That was obviously also the case with the flood in Mozambique in 2000. It can be argued that our analyses supplement or specify the conclusions of Robinson as far as they supply the foundation for concluding that media coverage is not necessarily a crucial precondition for bringing about policy responses to humanitarian crises. That is one of the crucial lessons that can be learned from the two African crises analysed here

and it may also be the case for the Indian cyclone in 1999. The rest of the cases analysed in this paper, Kosovo, North Korea and Afghanistan, buttress the overall conclusion that the CNN effect only occasionally plays a decisive role in influencing decision-makers to allocate large amounts of aid.

Finally, we may conclude that natural disasters and complex emergencies have a greater tendency to become 'forgotten crises' when major aid donors, namely Western governments, have no particular security interests vested in the afflicted regions. In that case, two factors may very well determine the volume of emergency aid that is being allocated: the presence and strength of humanitarian stakeholders in the region, and the curiosity and persistency of the international press.

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